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# THE HIGHLANDERS OF SOUTH VIETNAM

A Review of Political Developments and Forces

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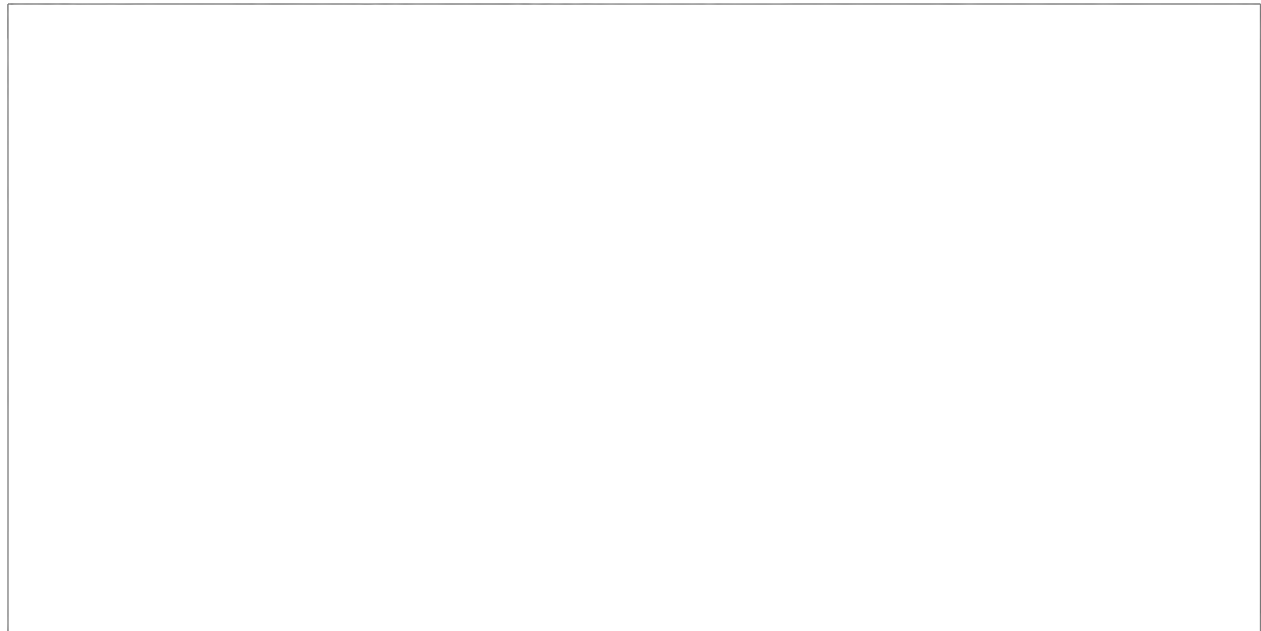
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## INTRODUCTION

"To seize and control the Highlands is to solve  
the whole problem of South Vietnam."

General Vo Nguyen Giap

The strategic importance of the Highlands of South Vietnam is recognized by military and political authorities on both sides of the current Viet Cong conflict. But what are the political and economic forces, either native or alien, that influence any effort to control this sparsely populated area that encompasses half of South Vietnam? How have the primitive Highlanders who have been propelled into this political struggle at the same time that they are experiencing drastic cultural changes been effected?

It is the intention of this study to bring together a history of the political, economic and social developments in the Highlands, especially since 1954 when the area came under Vietnamese Government direction, so that the area and its problems can be better understood and, in part, answers to the questions raised above suggested. It is also intended to review briefly the numerous Vietnamese and American programs initiated at various times in the Highlands and outline the results. Except as necessary background information so that the reader may better understand how the Highlander lives as opposed to the Vietnamese, a discussion of the culture of the Highlander has been avoided since several recent studies exist on this subject.

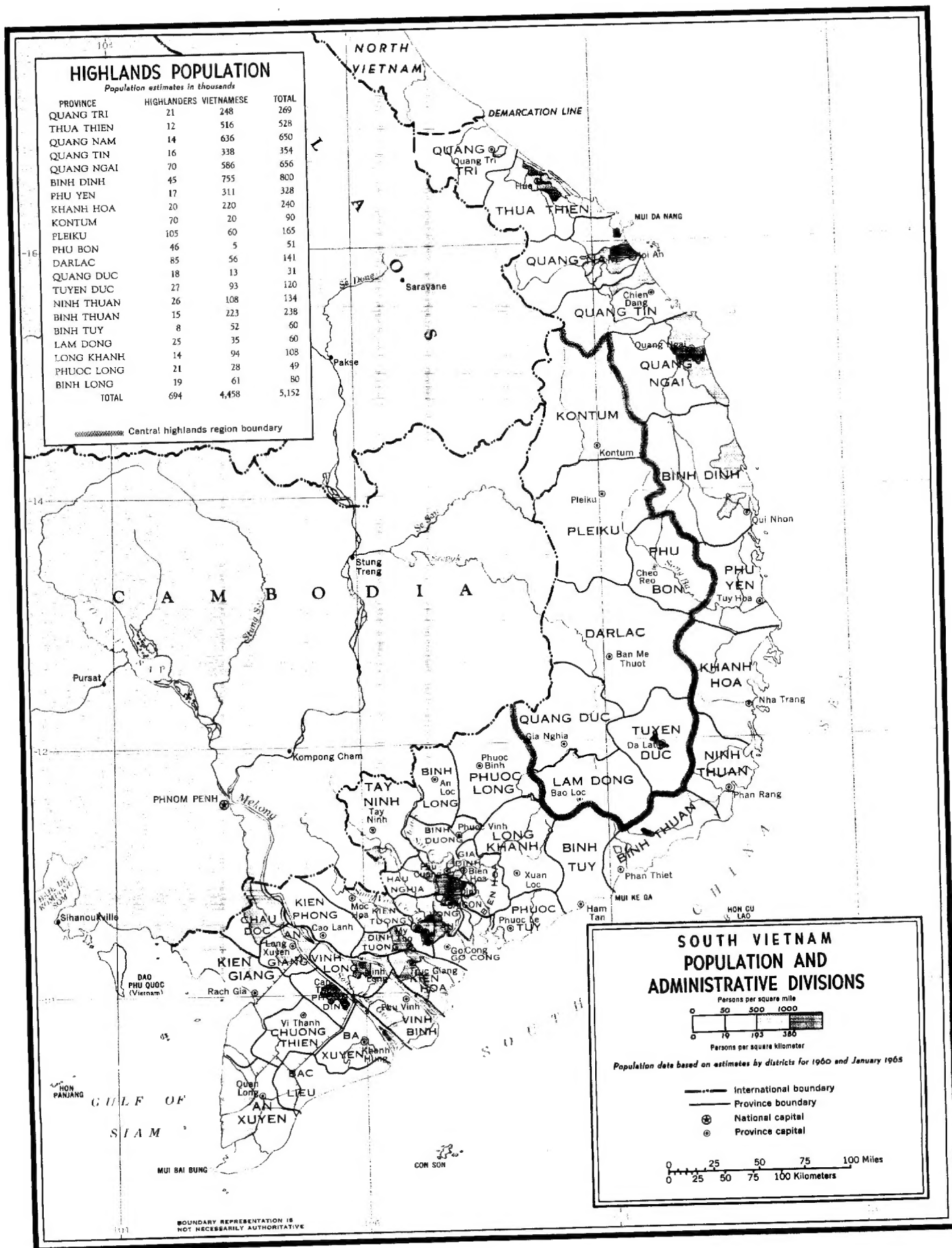
There are few Western authorities or scholars who are knowledgeable in any great depth on the Highlands minorities. Such as exist are primarily French administrators and missionaries who lived in the region, antropologists who have conducted cultural studies, a few American missionaries who have dedicated their lives to working with these primitive peoples, and Dr. Gerald C. Hickey, currently with The RAND Corporation but who has spent the last ten years studying these people. There are no Vietnamese authorities who have come to public attention. Though little is known of some of the tribal groups and further studies are desirable, there exists today sufficient cultural information on the Highlanders to provide adequate background knowledge to civilian and military officials, both Vietnamese and American, involved in this region. There is no known recent publication of any detail on the political history of the Highlanders and the effects Vietnamese, American and Communist programs in the area have had on these people. It is hoped that this study will help fill that gap.

This study has made use of both unclassified and classified reports prepared by various U.S. Government agencies and independent scholars. The most useful information was contained in State Department reporting, U.S. AID memoranda, and CIA information reports. Press reporting on the area is limited and was found to be often inaccurate. The publications of research and educational institutions provided valuable background information. More than one thousand individual reports were consulted of which approximately one-fourth were germane to this study.

Significant gaps in the information available are to be noted. There are no accurate population figures for the area, with estimates of Highlanders ranging from 500,000 to 1,000,000. The population figures cited in this study are therefore the best judgment of the author, derived from the numerous and conflicting data available, and are used to show magnitude rather than a precise knowledge. Information on Highlander leaders is also sketchy and confusing. Biographic resumes included in the body of this study and found also in the appendix leave much to be desired and are subject to correction and expansion by more knowledgeable persons than the author. In most instances, information available reflects the views expressed by Vietnamese officials to American officials and does not reflect views expressed by Vietnamese among themselves. This leaves a gap in our understanding of Vietnamese intentions in the Highlands which can be filled in part by relating announced programs to the expressed attitudes of the officials charged with conducting the programs and the support provided by the Central Government. There are also gaps in our knowledge of events that occurred and the incidents that led up to these events. In some instances the author, [redacted] has attempted to bring the forces at work into cleared focus from his personal observations and conversations with Highlanders and Vietnamese officials.

If this study provides the reader with a better understanding of the political and economic forces at work, the frictions between the Highlander and Vietnamese, the Vietnamese and American programs that have been attempted in the Highlands, and the aspirations of the Highlanders, then it will have served its purpose.

Washington, D.C.  
15 June 1966



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## I.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND UNTIL 1955

Nearly half of South Vietnam is composed of the Darlac Plateau and Annamite (Truong Son) Mountain Chain (termed Pays Montagnard du Sud (PMS) by the French), which is inhabited by primitive ethnic groups who are called "Moi" (savages) by the Vietnamese lowlanders and "Montagnards" (mountaineers) by the French. These primitive peoples, numbering about 700,000 and made up of approximately 22 ethnic groups (referred to as tribes), are as individually different from tribe to tribe as the American Indians. They inhabited the area prior to the advent of the Vietnamese and are racially included in the Malayo-Polynesian ethnic group, divided into those tribes who speak Malayo-Polynesian languages learned as a result of the influence of the Chams during the first millenium A.D. and those tribes who speak Mon-Khmer languages. Historically, the Highlands have been a buffer zone in the struggles among Vietnamese, Khmer, Siamese, Lao and colonial powers, with the Highlanders generally resisting outside enroachment and remaining relatively aloof from these currents of history. Though the Highlanders are linguistically and culturally variegated, prior to the establishment of French administration at the end of the 19th century, there was no political super-structure or recognized permanent leadership beyond the village. Today, the village is still the most important political unit.

The culture of the Highlanders is radically different from Vietnamese culture, and the Vietnamese have made little or no real attempt toward understanding these differences; nor were they afforded an opportunity during the days of French control. Slash and burn shifting agriculture is the predominant form practiced by the Highlanders with villages moving only when the productivity of the land becomes exhausted or if a natural catastrophe strikes, such as an epidemic, fire, or if the village is struck by lightening. This primitive technique destroys the forest resources. Hunting, though important, has become more a leisure-time activity, with fishing the important dietary supplement. Domestic animals also play a large role in highland life, with the buffalo being the most important and in many villages a man's wealth is gauged by the number of buffaloes he has sacrificed. In most instances, land is controlled by the family, clan or village; individual ownership is rare. All the ethnic groups in the Highlands have a traditional system of land tenure and definite mechanisms for holding and transferring title or use of land. The kinship system varies among tribes, with the Rhade, Jarai, M'nong Raglai practicing a matrilineal system;

the Koho, Katu, Jeh, Cua and Stieng practicing a patrilineal system; and the Bahnar and Sedang practicing a bilateral system. Religion plays a dominant role in the lives of the Highlanders, who believe in a pantheon of spirits associated with inanimate objects, topographical features, ancestors, birds and animals. Religious observances are characterized for most tribes by periods of ritual sacrifices and heavy drinking. Life is centered in the family and village, with the individual strongly attached to his traditional village lands where dwell the spirits that control his life. Disease, hunger, cold and fear are a constant part of life for these superstitious peoples.

The recorded history of the Highlands is a complicated series of inter-tribal wars and shifting allegiances with the Cham, Khmer and Vietnamese. French penetration into the area during the last half of the 19th century was achieved not without great difficulty; the pacification of the Highlands continued until very recent times. The establishment of French plantations after World War I precipitated considerable unrest among the Highlanders. The allocation of land in Darlac Province to French rubber planters during the 1920's deprived the Rhade and M'nong of land which, even though little of it was cultivated at any one time, yet was traditionally theirs for future use. They considered it an invasion of their lands, and revolts by the Highlanders against the French began occurring in 1928. In 1931, a revolt marked by several ambushes of French troops and attacks on French outposts broke out among the groups in the southern Highlands as a reaction to French settlement and establishment of plantations in that area. It lasted until 1933. In 1936, another wave of unrest lasting until 1938 began in Kontum Province and spread throughout the Highlands. There were instances of armed attacks against French authorities, particularly in the area occupied by the Sedang. The Hre of Kontum Province are said to have mutinied in 1949 under the leadership of their provincial chief, Din Loye, and a former corporal in the Indochina Militia, Dinh Diu, and to have killed as many as 5,000 Vietnamese, but there is no information that would substantiate this figure. Since 1954, when the Vietnamese took over the administration of the Highlands and began extensive movement of Vietnamese into the area, unrest has been constant, with revolts occurring in 1958, 1964 and 1965.

In 1898, a mixed Franco-Vietnamese administration was prescribed for the peoples of the Vietnamese side of the Annamite Chain, but in practice the administration was entirely French. The Court of Hue was allowed to appoint an Imperial Delegate for the area, established as a Crown Domain, but he was the only Vietnamese

official employed there. The area was maintained as a reserve where economic exploitation was carried on exclusively by the French planters and where Vietnamese settlement was carefully controlled almost to the point of non-existence. An estimate of 1953 showed only 6,000 Vietnamese in the Highlands, apparently excluding the Dalat area. Administratively, the Highlands (PMS) was divided into three provinces: Darlac, Pleiku, and Kontum (each larger than today's boundaries); and each with a French resident. The provinces were divided into districts and the districts were divided into cantons. The officials at the district and canton levels, as well as the assistants of the resident, were Highlanders. A medical service was established by the administration throughout the Highlands, and schools were begun by the administration and by the missionaries as well. Corvee labor and military service were required of the Highlanders, constituting the primary source of labor for the French plantations in the Highlands. The missionaries provided the Rhade with a written language which is now taught in the Rhade schools.

When in 1945 the Japanese overthrew the French administration in Indochina, they encouraged the Highlanders as well as the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians to throw off their French masters. The tribesmen in the French forces, however, remained loyal, and after the Japanese surrender it did not take the French long to re-establish themselves in the Highlands.

Trouble in the Highlands during this period centered on an attempt by Rhade elements to establish their autonomy. Y Bih Alio, a Rhade, was deputy chief of the native Indochinese Guard. In August 1945, he supposedly joined the Viet Minh and organized a militia in Banmethuot which drove the French from Darlac Province. It is likely that Y Bih, representing Highlander opposition to foreign control, was encouraged by the Japanese. In December 1945, Y Bih was arrested by the French and in 1946 sentenced to 20 years hard labor. Bao Dai released him in either 1951 or 1952 but he continued to refuse to support the French. Y Bih continued his efforts to obtain autonomy for his peoples and when his activities were halted by the Vietnamese Government in 1958 and he faced imprisonment he took to the bush. Today he is the best known Highlander with the Viet Cong and besides being Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFLSV), is chairman of the Movement of Highland Autonomous Nationalities

After the French regained control of the Highlands, they revised the administrative system and in May 1946, Admiral

d'Argenlieu, as French High Commissioner, set up a Federal Commission for the Highlands, which in 1947 became the Delegation of the High Commission for the administration of the five provinces of the Highlands; i.e., Darlac, Haut Donnai, Kontum, Langbien and Pleiku. In 1946, the French began organizing the Armed Forces of the Racial Minorities which were directly attached to the Commissioners of the French Republic and were not under Vietnamese Army control because, as the French explained it, the minorities possessed strong individuality and had never been entirely assimilated by the Vietnamese. The French position was that the population which made up these minorities was subordinated directly to the Imperial Crown and must enjoy a special status. In late 1948, the Mountaineer Guard of the Mountain Plateau of South Indochina (PMS) was formed from part of the former Indochinese Guard of South Annam. This unit with a strength of 2,376 in 1950, including 115 French, had the mission to maintain security and participate in pacification operations by the side of French troops in the Highlands.

The exchange of letters of 8 March 1949 between President Auriol and H.M. Bao Dai specified in Article I that "the administration of the non-Vietnamese populations whose historical home is situated on Vietnamese territory" should be defined in a special statute agreed between Bao Dai and the French Government, guaranteeing the free evolution of these peoples in accordance with their traditions and customs. An ordinance issued by Bao Dai on 15 April 1950 placed the provinces involved under his own direct authority as Head of State of Vietnam, thus excluding still the normal Vietnamese administration. Statutes organizing the administration were issued for the Highlands (PMS) in May 1951. Similar arrangements were made for the highland minority areas of Tonkin. As a result, the existing High Commissioner's Delegate in the Highlands (PMS) became an Imperial Delegate, although the post continued to be filled by a French officer. However, a single Delegation for both the Plateaux Montagnard du Sud (PMS) and Plateaux Montagnard du Nord (PMN) was instituted soon thereafter with a Vietnamese as Delegate; but Frenchmen were appointed Secretary-General to both PMS and PMN. In addition, a joint Franco-Vietnamese Economic and Social Council for the Highlands (PMS) was set up.

The exclusion of the new national administration from the Highlands understandably did not sit well with Vietnamese nationalist politicians, especially as under arrangements made in 1951-52, the Vietnamese Government had to contribute to the Highland budget. However, Bao Dai was intent on preserving the Highlands as a private hunting preserve, and the French supported his attitude.

In 1952, a Development Plan for the Highlands was issued. The Plan proposed to convert the Highlanders to a settled life by developing agriculture and ancillary industries, introducing more plantations, and setting up concerns such as tea factories. It was estimated that the area involved was 22,000 square miles with a population of only 25 to the square mile. During this same period the Viet Minh were slowly spreading their control over the tribes in the area, including the Bahnar, Jarai and Rhade. The 325th Viet Minh Division was formed near An Khe in February 1953 (the same division that began infiltrating into the Highlands in 1964 from North Vietnam). Military pressure on the French and local forces in the Highlands increased and effective French administrative control decreased to the area around Banmethuot and Dalat by the end of June 1954.

The defeat of the French and the Geneva Accords of 1954 signaled the beginning of a new epoch for the Highlands as well as other parts of Indochina. Bao Dai announced in July 1954 that he was surrendering his special powers in the Highlands. In March 1955 a new ordinance put the Highlands under the control of the National Government in Vietnam. The Imperial Delegation and the Secretaryships-General were abolished and a new Government Delegate for the Highlands was appointed; all the French province chiefs were displaced. In June 1955, the chiefs of the Highland tribes were summoned to a ceremony at Banmethuot, where following a practice introduced by the French in 1926 they took the oath of allegiance to President Ngo Dinh Diem according to the traditional formula which involved inter alia the sacrifice of buffaloes and the drinking of blood.

The Highlanders have had varying experiences and fortunes in their contact with outsiders. Missionaries and French colonial administrators, for example, have had considerable influence on some of the tribes, while others have resisted French control. The Rhade accepted French authority more readily than did other Highland groups. French influence is therefore more manifest in their area in the form of schools, plantations, and a relatively large number of French-speaking Rhade. The Sedang, Stieng and M'Nong resisted French control. By and large, contact with outsiders tended to be more disturbing than beneficial. The Indochina War caused dissension among Highlanders, as some fought for the French and others for the Viet Minh. Today, in the struggle between the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese Government, they are once again divided. Large numbers of Vietnamese settling on tribal lands during the

past ten years have disrupted tribal customs and have had a disturbing effect on village land traditions. Land grabbing by the Vietnamese, or in some cases, the fear of land grabbing, is one of the primary causes of tribal discontent. Resettlement of tribal villages by the Vietnamese Government, in some instances by force, in order to exercise better security and control has resulted in a strong feeling of insecurity and frustration, especially where villages are relocated away from traditional village land.

The intense dislike of the Highlanders for any form of external control was at no time overcome, but so long as the French were a power to be feared, governed the entry of Vietnamese into the area, and were the channel through which these primitive peoples received the few commodities which they needed from the outside world -- notably, salt, cotton goods and scrap iron -- the Highlanders were for the most part reluctantly acquiescent in their overlordship. The French failed to break down the old hostility between the Highlanders and the Vietnamese. Partly out of mistrust of the Vietnamese attitude towards the despised savages, whom the Vietnamese regarded as inferiors, as lowly beings unworthy to be classed as human, certainly not as equals; partly from the desire commonly felt by anthropologists, whether professional or amateur, to preserve archaic ways of life, the French administrators kept the Highlanders in a water-tight compartment, into which the Vietnamese could rarely penetrate except as clerks and servants to French officials or as traders of doubtful honesty. Under a light French control the old traditions were consequently maintained; the village remained the unit of society and government.

Then, with the defeat of the French and their withdrawal from the Highlands, the protective cover was removed, and parental administration disappeared and the Highlanders were exposed. The Vietnamese moved in to administer an area they knew nothing about and a people they did not respect. Whereas the area had previously been denied to the Vietnamese for settlement, they now poured in by the tens of thousands. By 1955 there were 80,000 Vietnamese in the Highlands, primarily around Dalat, Route 20 in Haut Donnai (now the provinces of Lam Dong and Tuyen Duc) and the towns of Banmethuot and Kontum. By the end of 1956 more than 140,000 Vietnamese refugees had settled on tribal lands. In 1959 there were more than 25,000 Vietnamese resettled in Pleiku. By 1960 there were more than 20,000 Vietnamese in Kontum and by 1962 Darlac Province had over 54,000 Vietnamese. By 1963 Vietnamese accounted for more than 40 percent of the population in the seven provinces of Kontum,

Pleiku, Phu Bon, Darlac, Quang Duc, Tuyen Duc and Lam Dong, which made up the Vietnamese Government Central Highlands Region. Where Highlanders had previously participated in local administration, this activity was now undertaken largely by the Vietnamese, who made little or no use of Highlander civil servants. The French had not prepared the Highlanders for this tidal wave of invasion, nor had they prepared the Vietnamese who had assumed the task of governing. There was no place in Vietnamese plans for the old traditional life of the Highlanders, who had so suddenly emerged into the outside world.

## II.

VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN THE HIGHLANDS  
1954 - 1958

The Vietnamese administrations that came to power in both Hanoi and Saigon because of the defeat of the French and the resulting Geneva Agreements of July 1954 faced serious limitations in handling the Highland minorities in their areas due to their lack of experience, especially in the south. The Hanoi regime had two significant advantages over Saigon, however, in that the Viet Minh had necessarily lived among the Highland minorities for some years during their struggle against the French, which permitted them to establish political structures in minority areas, as they gained a better understanding of the customs of these minorities; and secondly, the Highland minorities of the north were more used to central authority and less likely to express their discontent through armed resistance than their counterparts in the south.

When the Viet Minh came to power in the north, they immediately sought to gain the allegiance of the northern Highlanders, basing their plans on the policy for minorities adopted by Communist China. The Communist goal was to win over the minorities by various methods including promises of autonomy (nominal as it might be), respect for minority languages and cultures, and representation in the affairs of the central government. In May 1955, Hanoi announced the formation of a Thai-Meo Autonomous Region, now called the Tay Bac Autonomous Region, comprising the areas of Tonkin between the Laos border and a line roughly 20 miles west of the Red River. A similar autonomous region for other minority peoples, notably the Tho and the Nung, called the Viet Bac Autonomous Region was announced in June 1956. Though in reality the extent of self-government allowed was certainly nominal, it was not impossible that the local people were conciliated by the gesture.

No such political program for the Highlanders in the south was formulated by the Saigon government, which was in the painful process of establishing a viable central government, controlling the sects in the Delta and handling the hordes of refugees from the north. The transition of the Highlands from a Crown Domain to control by the central government took approximately a year, resulting in overlapping authority and confusion during the period. The ministries in Saigon increasingly contacted the various chiefs of the technical services in the Highlands directly and approached



them with requests. Certain activities, especially refugee affairs, were subject to the direct orders and funds of the central government in Saigon through the person of a Delegate of the Central Government who overlapped with the Imperial Delegate. Refugees from the north were moved into the Highlands before the government had time to formulate a land policy which took into consideration the traditional Highlander land system. When President Diem visited Banmethuot in June 1955, it was for the purpose of accepting an oath of allegiance from the Highland tribes and not to grant autonomy or recognize special status.

It was believed by some Western observers that such loyalty as the Highlanders had toward the French, based, not unnaturally, on self-interest, could be transferred to any other authority which would accord reasonable treatment. Much would depend on the attitude adopted by the central government. The Highlander despised the Vietnamese as effeminate, had no sense of Vietnamese nationalism and was unaccustomed to control by a central government. The Vietnamese disliked life in the Highlands for climatic reasons: few knew the local languages; they detested the general squalor of Highlander life; they despised the Highlanders as backward barbarians; and they had no experience in administering the Highlanders. Thus there was a grave risk that the Highlands would become a dumping ground for the least efficient Vietnamese officials. These Western observers believed that should the Vietnamese take their responsibilities seriously, seek with determination to raise the standard of life in the Highlands without dislocation entirely of the historical ways of life and government, the Highlanders might settle down. But whatever policy might be adopted by the government these observers viewed the outlook of the Highlanders as being so parochial that they would not likely unite to serve their common interests.

From the Vietnamese point of view the Highlands was new territory; settlers, encouraged by the government, moved in at an ever increasing rate. The government program was to develop and stabilize the area through the influx of anti-Communist refugees from the north. The government policy in Saigon toward the Highlanders appears to have been to equate them politically with the Vietnamese, to persuade them to improve their agricultural methods, to ensure that they took part in the economic development of the Highlands and to encourage them to assist in their own administration -- in other words the assimilation of the Highlanders into the Vietnamese culture. This policy was not implemented on the ground. There were numerous instances where government administrators and military forces treated the Highlanders with contempt and even with great brutality. The

Highlanders were exploited by the military and by merchants. Moreover, land was grabbed by the settlers. There developed a deep sense of frustration among the Highlanders at not being able to do anything about the situation. Towns such as Banmethuot and Pleiku doubled in size and the areas surrounding them were dotted with new villages and fields.

The Vietnamese administration of the Highlands, being both mentally and physically remote from a large number of the tribes, failed to make a sufficiently good impression on them. The officials concerned were mostly ignorant of Highlander affairs and took little interest in them. There was a lack of normal government services in the villages, especially schools and medical facilities; there was no economic assistance for the Highlanders; and they were not protected from exploitation of unscrupulous middlemen. The lack of any real knowledge of the Highlanders among government officials was almost universal. In some areas, the authorities insisted that the only tribes in their area were the Moi (savages) and that these Highlanders had no other names for themselves. In mid-1956, the Bureau of Ethnic Minorities in Hue knew practically nothing about Highlanders' habits and customs. There was no clear idea where the Highland villages were, nor was there any accurate picture of the Highlanders' economy. Little accurate information on the Highlanders was available to an administration which badly needed to know the correct nomenclature, distribution and territorial arrangement of the major tribal groups, as well as have at its fingertips information regarding the economy, way of life and needs of the various tribal units and villages. Such information was essential for the proper administration of the Highlands, yet there was no effort being made by the government to obtain this information, nor had any responsible authorities studied the French files in Hue.

The Highlanders resented this lack of interest and general attitude of the Vietnamese and were aware that the government had failed to assist them economically. In fairness to the government it must be remembered that the French had excluded the Vietnamese from the Highlands and that when they became responsible for the area they had little time in which to get to know the Highlanders and appreciate their problems. The government might have sought to retain some of the French administrators on contract to the Crown in the Highlands who had the knowledge and expertise which might have made the transition easier. But it is doubtful that the Vietnamese, who had just gained their freedom from the French, would wish to retain French administrators, especially in an area where the new government's policy of settlement was a complete reversal of the

old French policy of exclusion. Nor is it likely that the French administrators would have been able to adjust to their new role and the new policy.

Added to the administrative problems was the government's firm determination to continue its policy of refugee settlement while disregarding the territorial claims of the Highlanders, the poor communications in the Highlands which hindered the government's ability to contact many Highlander settlements, and the penetration tactics of the Viet Cong who intended to ultimately control and use the Highlanders for their own expansionist purposes.

The Hanoi Government capitalized on the Saigon Government's shortcomings in the Highlands. After the Geneva Agreements approximately 55,000 Nungs and 10,000 Muongs took the opportunity to regroup south, while about 5,000 Rhade and an unknown number of Highlanders from other tribes, perhaps numbering another 5,000, regrouped north including four out of five of the Rhade doctors. The Viet Minh left behind cadre and supply caches. The Hanoi regime established the Central Minorities School in Hanoi to turn out political cadre and there were special schools for the Bahnar, Jarai and Rhade. By 1956 the Hanoi regime was sending agents to penetrate the tribal villages in the south. These agents, although Vietnamese, were said to be so motivated that they came to the villages prepared to live as natives for years at a time. They dyed their skin to resemble the Highlanders, filled their teeth, learned the language. These agents promised reduction of taxes, a good supply of consumer goods, and a system of local autonomy such as was introduced in the north. They stressed the lack of interest by the Saigon Government in the Highlanders and the lack of good faith in failing to keep promises. These agents did not stress Communism, and it is unlikely that Communist ideology would have had much appeal, but the innate dislike felt by the Highlanders towards external control rendered them amenable to any incitement against constituted authority. By 1959 the Highlanders who had regrouped north in 1954 were being infiltrated back to the south in large numbers.

The Viet Cong plan was long term with the objective of subverting the tribes and using them at the opportune moment. The approach was soundly planned. The Highlanders would greet the Viet Cong agents as the first representatives of any authority in their experience who were prepared to learn their ways, treat them as equals, and who were sufficiently interested to give them advice and assistance. Thus, without the introduction of proper countermeasures by the government there was little doubt that the Viet Cong would be successful in winning over the Highlanders and eventually gaining

control of a very large number of them. Countermeasures were not developed until the early 1960's when the Viet Cong nearly accomplished their plan.

The Vietnamese Government began in 1957 to recognize the need to improve its understanding of tribal affairs and implement a program among the Highlanders so that they could be assimilated into the Vietnamese economy. President Diem, in a conversation with an American observer on 9 July 1957, stated that the government was paying attention to tribal problems and that he had appointed Lt. Colonel Huynh Cong Tinh to head an organization in Dalat called "Inspections and Special Studies" which would study tribal affairs and recommend to the government measures to raise the standard of living and level of education. Diem recognized the problem as being special and requiring psychology and patience. He was bitterly critical of the French whom he accused of having exploited the Highlanders while making a show of helping them. Diem believed the Highlanders to be intelligent, responding favorably to the treatment they were receiving, and that they could be assimilated into village type Vietnamese life. Of all the tribes, the Rhade would be the most difficult to convert, in Diem's opinion. They have a considerable amount of Cham blood, and he described them as "tricky" peoples who in their conduct of affairs resembled the Thais. Diem also stated that he had authorized the establishment of two schools in Dalat for training civil guards and civic action cadres of tribal background in order to implement the government program for helping the tribes.

During a meeting with American Ambassador Elbridge Dubrow on 3 August 1957, President Diem discussed at some length the problem of integrating the Highlanders into the Vietnamese economy. He again stated that he had started a school for the Highlanders in Dalat and intended to bring up to 200 selected Highlanders to Dalat for a four-month course in various subjects so that they could return to their villages and carry on civic action community work. He also explained that there are many fertile valleys in the Highlands where, with construction of small dams on the streams, the Highlanders could be taught to raise water-grown, rather than dry rice, and thus raise their standard of living by more abundant crops. Diem said that he had already talked with several tribal chiefs in the Banmethuot and Pleiku areas and had asked them if they would be willing to settle permanently on land to be given to their village group and cleared by the government and had received their agreement. Diem acknowledged Viet Cong agents were working in the Highlands whose efforts he wanted to combat by the methods he described above.

Though Diem's intentions were good, his program was only half-heartedly implemented. The officers responsible for studying the Highlanders and recommending government programs were poorly prepared to undertake such work and accomplished little. Educational programs and the establishment of schools favored the Vietnamese settlers in the Highlands. Diem was still talking of providing land for tribal villages in 1962.

As a missionary described the situation in early 1958, the Vietnamese Government was sincerely trying to penetrate the tribal areas and to integrate the tribal peoples into the structure of Vietnam but lacked funds, roads and personnel to staff administrative posts. Anti-government feeling among the Highlanders was growing and a more nationalistic spirit developing among the tribes, who believed the Vietnamese were determined to take over the best land and might ultimately force the tribes on to reservations. Diem's plans to counter Viet Cong activities in the Highlands were unsuccessful because the people responsible for implementing them did not understand how to go about the job, nor were many in sympathy with the policy to improve the standards of the Highlanders. The government had failed to train a corps of civil servants to handle the special problems faced in the Highlands and continued to rely on individuals not interested in the problems. An administrative assignment to the Highlands was looked upon as unfavorable and in many cases as punishment by government officials.

Four years after the Saigon government came to power, it was still attempting to implement a viable program for the Highlands and was faced with growing unrest among the tribal groups and subversion of these groups by the Viet Cong. Since the government had found itself incapable of implementing a political civic action program it resorted to a military program and oppressive action to control the Highlanders which further aggravated the situation.

III.

U. S. GOVERNMENT PROPOSALS 1956 - 1958

The United States had also been watching developments in the Highlands for some time and had received the reports of two specialists on minorities in Southeast Asia covering the Highlanders' problems and recommending courses of action for the Government of Vietnam. In August 1956 Mr. R. O. D. Noone, Advisor on Aborigines, Federation of Malaya, concluded in his study that the Highlanders "resent outside control and interference in tribal matters, particularly in regard to their territorial rights (and) such interference in the past has resulted in unrest and rebellion. A large number of Montagnards (Highlanders) are outside Government control and a percentage of these are already under some degree of Viet Minh influence. Continued infringement of the territorial claims of the Montagnards . . . will result in unrest which would be exploited by the Viet Minh thus presenting a most serious threat to the security of the central government, entailing an indefinite postponement of the economic development plan. Although inexperience in Montagnard affairs and lack of finance and adequate communications has hampered the carrying out of Government policy towards the Montagnards, such a policy as currently being implemented could not compete with the Viet Minh approach, nor could it successfully counter the threat" of Highlander unrest and revolt. "A new and progressive policy should be introduced aimed at winning over and effectively controlling the Montagnards, to enable them to contribute to the economic development of the country, and that such a policy be implemented by a special authority responsible for the administration, protection and advancement of the tribesmen. Sufficient finance (should) be made available to train officers for the authority envisaged above . . ." Noone then recommended that a specialized central authority with its own budget be set up to be responsible for the administration, protection and advancement of the Montagnard peoples, under the direction of a Director of Montagnard Affairs at Presidency level who would have representatives at Regional, Provincial and District levels with subsidiary field officers." With regards to Government policy, Noone recommended that the Government "accept them as an ethnic minority on an equal basis socially, economically and politically with the other communities in Vietnam, recognize their administrative organization and headmanship system which should be fully integrated with the local administration and accept their traditional territorial claims as inviolable, allow them to continue to practice their traditional mode of life but

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to encourage those who are still semi-nomadic to adopt gradually a more settled way of life; to improve their economy by increasing food production and by encouraging them to plant more cash crops; encourage them to participate in the defense and security of the country and to post only Montagnard troops and police in areas in which they form the majority of the population; to provide protective posts for those communities who are currently under Viet Cong influence." In order to carry out this policy Noone recommended that the Government launch a campaign "to re-educate the Vietnamese in their attitude toward the Montagnards . . . that no further resettlement of Vietnamese be permitted in the P.M.S. until such time as the territorial arrangement of the various tribes has been ascertained and then only in areas not claimed by the Montagnards, that suitable Montagnards be trained centrally as school teachers and dressers (sic. possibly first aid) and that in due course further schools and dispensaries be established at the main concentrations of population, and that the basic administrative data required concerning the Montagnard tribes should be collected at the earliest opportunity."

Though these recommendations could have been implemented in 1956 they were contrary to the established Vietnamese policy, a policy of rapid settlement of the Highlands and assimilation of the Highlanders into Vietnamese society.

Dr. Gerald C. Hickey of Michigan State University prepared a preliminary research report on the Highlands in June 1957 in which he made a series of recommendations which would improve relations between the Highlanders and the Vietnamese but not change the overall policy of the Government. "In view of the pressing need to establish in the minds of the Mountaineers the good faith of the Government" programs improving medical services, education, controlling alcohol sales and commodity prices should be established. There should be "joint Vietnamese-Mountaineer committees in each province to act as advisors to province chiefs, Administrators . . . should receive a special course of training in mountaineer customs and traditions and mountaineers should be placed in administrative positions whenever possible. The government (should) adopt a firm policy regarding the land rights of the Mountaineers as soon as possible and to publicize the adopted policy widely."

Half-hearted attempts apparently were made at the Saigon level to implement a select few of the recommendations pertaining to education, medical services, trade and assignment of Highlanders to select positions in the administration, but the basic problems were never attacked.

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U.S. Government officials counceled President Diem, his brother Nhu and other senior members of the Vietnamese Government on policies that they believed would bring the Vietnamese and Highlanders together and advance the development of the Highlands. This advice was in conflict with the immediate need the Vietnamese Government believed existed in providing land to the refugees and at the same time improving the security of the Highlands. They could not wait for the development of programs for the Highlanders and did not have officials skilled in undertaking such planning or executing the plans once they were developed. To develop a logical and just land program that would recognize Highlander rights would take time, study, legislation, and an understanding of Highlander life on the part of the officials responsible for implementing the program. The officials in Saigon saw the Highlands as a wide open area for settlement and the Highlanders as an obstruction to this settlement. If the Highlanders would accept the Vietnamese way of life then they would be assimilated, otherwise they would be pushed back further into the hills. The reaction of the Vietnamese to proposals for improving the conditions of the Highlanders was similar to the reaction of Americans during the period of western expansion with regard to the American Indian. The leaders were in agreement that there should be programs that would improve the conditions of the Highlanders but the officials and Vietnamese citizens living in the Highlands could not see spending money, material or time on the Highlander when they themselves could utilize these resources so much better.

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Advice at the Saigon level and support of programs through the ministries in Saigon did not change the attitudes of the administrators in the Highlands. The first requirement, that of developing administrators who were trained to work in the Highlands, if recognized, was not acted upon. The Vietnamese Government assigned administrators to the Highlands who were politically unreliable or possessed less competence than the administrators assigned to lowland areas. To be sent to the Highlands was to receive a sentence of exile.



IV.

THE BAJARAKA AUTONOMY MOVEMENT 1957 - 1958

The Vietnamese settlers and officials in the Highlands would have preferred to have received land or positions in delta areas. The Highlands were alien to them and many feared the Highlanders, whom they thought of as barbaric savages. The Highlands were a long way from Saigon, the area was developing in frontier style, and justice for the Highlander was at the very least difficult and in most instances impossible to obtain. The settlers, protected by police and military forces, held the more powerful hand.

The Highlanders brooded over incidents involving the Vietnamese which became enlarged or exaggerated in the retelling. In 1956, there were several incidents of wanton brutality on the part of the Vietnamese toward the Highlanders. In one instance 40 miles south of Banmethuot, Vietnamese troops were alleged to have slaughtered the buffaloes of Highlanders indiscriminately and even to have shot at Highlander women for sport, wounding at least one seriously. Near Three Frontiers in what is now Quang Duc Province, the Vietnamese Army distrusted the local tribesmen who were formerly with the French military forces and there was considerable nostalgia among the tribes for the French administration. Relations between the Highlander's and the newly settled Vietnamese in Darlac Province were not good. The M'nong had broken off contact with the 2,500 Vietnamese Catholic refugees in Dak Mil within two months after the resettlement camp was built because they believed the Vietnamese refugees were responsible for bringing soldiers who would torture them. At Buon Ho, north of Banmethuot, the Vietnamese Army was greatly disliked by the Highlanders because of the tendency of the troops to loot food from the tribal villages.

The conditions created by the Vietnamese administration became untenable to the Highlanders. In early 1957, Highlander students attending the Lycee in Dalat formed a committee to investigate the possibilities of organizing a Highlander Autonomy Movement. Y Bham, oldest male member of his family and thus by Rhade legend leader of the Highlanders (see page 53), is reported to have called a meeting of the tribes in May 1957. Leaders said to represent most of the tribes went to the village of Buon Trap in Darlac Province (it is more likely that most representatives were from Rhade villages) to air their grievances.

Y Bham, at this stage, apparently realized that the Highlanders needed hospitals, schools and technical assistance from the Vietnamese Government and sought this assistance from the Darlac Province Chief without success.

By 1958, intellectual Highlanders, mainly from the missionary-trained Rhade, were organizing tribal opposition to the Government. The organizers went among the villages soliciting support for their movement. By July 1958, an organization, claiming to have the backing of some 200,000 Highlanders, was formed to defend the interests of the Highlanders. Its members were school teachers, local militiamen, personnel of the regular army, police and local employees of various Government installations who represented the various villages.

Four villages made up a commune which was headed by a council, which in turn appointed provincial delegates, who in turn appointed an overall representative of the Highlanders. There were four provincial committees (Kontum, Pleiku, Dalat and Banmethuot) with nine members each and a Central Committee composed of seven members. Four of the major tribes made up the organization, which was called The Bajaraka Autonomy Movement, a shortening of the tribal names of the Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade and Koho.

The Bajaraka organization's declared purpose was to fight "to the bitter end" to achieve autonomy for the Highlanders. Several tribal leaders talked in terms of using violent means, if necessary, to achieve the ultimate aim of the Highlanders. There were three factions developing in the Bajaraka Autonomous Movement. The first, apparently headed by Y Bham, wanted to work with the Vietnamese Government in gaining equality for the Highlanders. The second supported the French plantation owners and some French missionaries who proposed a neutral Vietnam with the Highlands being autonomous. The third faction supported the Viet Cong plan for complete autonomy of the Highlands as set up in North Vietnam and the unification of Vietnam under control of the Hanoi regime.

The organization listed its grievances:

a. The semi-autonomous status enjoyed by the Highlanders during the days of French administration was lost by them when the Vietnamese replaced the French without consultation on the part of the Vietnamese authorities, which the Highlanders considered contrary to the principles of self-determination.

b. Highlanders had very little representation in the Government administration in the Highlands, which had constantly discriminated against the Highlanders and treated them as second class citizens. There were inequities in the standard of living between Vietnamese and Highlander officials occupying the same grade or rank. Furthermore, no effort had been made to take into consideration the racial origins, customs, and way of life of the Highlander.

c. The main concern of the Government seemed to be to develop the Highlands by bringing in Vietnamese settlers. Some of the new Vietnamese agricultural colonies had been opened on land which belonged to the tribes, which had been dispossessed without compensation and pushed back to less fertile areas.

d. Little had been done to raise the educational level and the standard of living among the tribes.

e. Vietnamese settlers in the Highlands produced large quantities of agricultural products and created unfair competition by underselling the Highlanders in the market.

f. The stealing of food and other commodities by Vietnamese Army personnel and settlers continued and the culprits remained unpunished.

g. The local administrative authorities had fallen far behind in paying for work performed by Highlanders for the Government, and compulsory labor assignments were required by the authorities. Vietnamese workers received higher pay for the same type of work and were paid more regularly.

h. In 1958, some 3,000,000 piastres over and above the regular budget were allocated for social welfare among the tribes, but no part of this sum was used for its intended purpose.

i. The Government had done very little to develop good relations with the Highlanders, aside from the Psychological Welfare Department's project of translating a few books into tribal languages. Vietnamese Army officers stationed in the Highlands knew nothing of the Highlanders' languages or customs, and were incapable of winning the support of the Highlanders even if they had the desire to do so.

The Bajaraka organization sent two representatives who called on the American Ambassador in Saigon on 31 July 1958 to air minority grievances against the Vietnamese Government and to enlist the aid of the United States. The emissaries, Y Ju and Y Nam, were accompanied by Mr. Henry G. Lefever of the Menonite Central Committee who introduced them but did not take part in the conversation with Ambassador Durbrow. Previous letters had been forwarded through Mr. Lefever to the American Embassy. They produced a letter identical to one addressed to the Ambassador on 7 July, outlining tribal grievances and asking the Secretary General of the United Nations to consider the request of the Highlanders for the creation of a fact-finding commission to investigate conditions in the Highlands. The Bajaraka representatives indicated that this was the third letter they had attempted to send to the United Nations, and showed the Ambassador copies of it signed by 45 leading Highlanders and addressed to the British and French Ambassadors in Saigon for transmittal to their respective delegates at the United Nations. Ambassador Durbrow declined to accept the letters but promised unofficially to bring the minority problem to the attention of Vietnamese officials in Saigon.

The Bajaraka leaders apparently received some advice from French personnel living in the Highlands. Father Roger Bianchetti, a Catholic priest in Banmethuot, was approached by Bajaraka representatives in 1958, who showed him a copy of a petition which they proposed to send to President Diem. After studying the document, Bianchetti advised the representatives: "Do not demand independence, because your present state of development does not warrant it. By sending such a demand to the President you would be casting yourselves into a wasp's nest, and the only result might be further hardship for your people and imprisonment for yourselves. What you must do is continue to strive for autonomy. Draw up a petition for autonomy and give five copies to me. I will send one copy to the Secretary General of the United Nations, and one copy each to the Ambassadors of France, Great Britain, the United States and India, in Saigon."

By March 1958, Highlanders in government military units in Pleiku were reported deserting to Laos, one report put the figure at 600. In August 1958, officers and NCO's of Highlander origin in the Vietnamese Army (less than 200) were put under preventive arrest because they were suspected of political unreliability and of plotting to desert to Cambodia and link up with anti-Vietnamese tribal elements. Though these men were subsequently released the incident caused widespread disgruntlement among the Highlanders and increased restiveness.

The situation came to a head in September and October. On 8 September, a group calling itself "The Committee of Liberation" stated its demands for autonomy in a letter addressed to President Diem and signed by Y Bham Enuol, President of the Committee. On 12 October 1958, the leaders of the autonomy movement addressed a petition to President Diem bearing approximately 1,000 signatures requesting the release of the Highlanders who at the time were in prison in Pleiku. When no response was received, demonstrations were staged in Banmethuot, Kontum, Pleiku and Di Linh (Lam Dong Province) on 15 October. It was originally planned that some 800 Rhade from the area of Buon Ale village would participate in the Banmethuot demonstration; however, almost 2,000 persons converged on Banmethuot and carried on a demonstration that lasted for five hours, during which a spokesman enumerated tribal grievances connected with the implementation of the government resettlement program, complained about recent political arrests of Highlanders in Pleiku, and called for autonomy of the Highlands. Vietnamese Army troops in armored vehicles were finally dispatched to break up the demonstration.

On 27 October 1958, the Darlac Province Chief, Nguyen Van Tich, organized a meeting of Vietnamese and Highlander officials at the Lido Cinema in Banmethuot for the purpose of dispelling the idea that there was such a thing as an autonomous movement among the Highlanders. During the meeting Y Wing, a Rhade employed by the provincial administration and not a member of the autonomy movement, stated to the group: "The French used to tell us that 'the French and the Montagnards are brothers!' then along came the Viet Cong who said, 'the Viet Cong and the Montagnards are brothers!' Today, the Vietnamese are telling us, 'the Vietnamese and the Montagnards are brothers!' and this is very good! But what we want to know is, are these fine words true, or are they like those of the French and the Communists? We ask that these be not empty words but words proved by deeds!"

The Government's reaction was immediate. A military security unit was dispatched to Banmethuot to arrest the Highlander leaders. Eventually, all members of the Central Committee were arrested. Y Bham Enuol, Rhade and President of Bajaraka; Touneh-Yeh, Chairman of the Dalat (Koho) Committee; Nay Luett, Chairman of the Pleiku (Jarai) Committee; Paul Nur, Chairman of the Kontum (Bahnar) Committee; and Y Ju Ebam and Y Thih Ebam, Rhade and members of the Bajaraka Central Committee, were arrested. Y Bih Alio, Chairman of the Banmethuot (Rhade) Committee, was arrested earlier and held for about a week. The

other six leaders were sentenced to four years in prison but some were not released until 1964. The Government transferred and assigned insignificant duties to several officers and non-commissioned officers of tribal origin in the Vietnamese armed forces as well as a number of Highlanders in the civil service. In all, 35 Rhade officials were reassigned to the lowlands from the Darlac provincial administration. The practice of compiling intelligence dossiers on Highlander officials in provincial administration was resumed. Gatherings of more than three persons were prohibited, and the celebration of tribal feast days were banned.

It is not certain what happened to Y Bih Alio after the other leaders were arrested. One report states that he was not jailed because he was visiting the Viet Cong near his village of Buon Dryling when the Vietnamese Government arrested the other Bajaraka leaders in the fall of 1958, and thus escaped and joined the Viet Cong. Other reports have him joining the Viet Cong in 1960. One interesting report which cannot be confirmed states that Y Bih remained in his native village until 1960. The report states that Y Bham was released from jail in June 1960, returned to his native village of Buon Ta and began conferences with Y Bih and local Bajaraka committee members. Vietnamese National Police agents, learning of the meetings, arrested Y Bham but Y Bih managed to escape and join the Viet Cong. Y Bih continued his efforts to obtain autonomy for his people through association with the Viet Cong. Since 1961, he has been Chairman of the Movement of Highland Autonomous Nationalities and Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam.

The Bajaraka organization may have posed less of a problem than the Government imagined had Vietnamese intelligence on Highlander activity been adequate, but the Government was caught unaware of the strength or plans of the organization. Though the organization had a large number of Highlander leaders, its strength lay primarily with the Rhade. The Highlanders were in no position to use force and it is doubtful that any more than a small minority of the Rhade would have followed the leadership of the organization in resistance against the Government or that the organization had sufficient strength within the various tribes to have created resistance over a wide area.

Ngo Dinh Nhu, in conversations with Ambassador Durbrow, in November 1958, placed the responsibility for the autonomy movement on the Viet Cong as "merely part of the Communist

propaganda technique." He added that though the Communists had made considerable progress in recent months in winning over large numbers of Highlanders by promising autonomy, the Government had taken steps to counteract these developments and had slowed their activity down. Nhu did not believe that the Communists could succeed in making a homogenous group "out of these often antagonistic, aboriginal, ignorant peoples." Nhu claimed the Government was following and would continue to follow policies which would win over the loyalty of the Highlanders but this was a very slow process requiring a great deal of patience. He spoke of the program of granting permanent land to the Highland villages and the limited success the Government had had to date in inducing the Highlanders to remain on the land and utilize Vietnamese agricultural techniques. Nhu believed that gradually as the elders died and were buried in the new villages and the witch doctor and sorcerers found good omens in their new homes, the Highlanders would tend to settle down. Nhu added that the Government must step up its activities in establishing schools for the Highlanders in order to raise their educational level and eventually their standard of living.

President Diem was also preoccupied with the unrest in the Highlands. He visited Banmethuot on 12 January 1959, at which time he discussed the situation with Bui Thuc Duyen, the Darlac Province Chief, who had replaced Nguyen Van Tich. Duyen is said to have proposed that the administration of the Highlands be turned over to the Highlanders but that the administration be granted no funds, be unsupported by the police, Surete, Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps -- in short, be without any substance or power whatsoever. A Vietnamese Provincial Administration working with the Highlander administration would exercise the broadest powers. If Diem reacted favorably toward this proposal he took no action to implement it.

As predicted by Father Bianchetti, the Bajaraka leaders had indeed cast themselves into a wasp's nest, but it was not over the question of independence, it was over the request for autonomy that Bianchetti had advised the leaders to push for. Bianchetti had failed to realize that as far as the Government was concerned, to request autonomy was just as heinous as requesting independence. The result was that the Highlanders found themselves separated from leaders who had either been jailed or transferred, under additional pressure from the Government administration, and defenseless. The Government policy to assimilate the Highlanders as rapidly as possible into the Vietnamese economy continued to be

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administered in a half-hearted fashion with the authorities' sensitiveness hurt by the Highlanders' lack of appreciation. And the Viet Cong stepped up their organizational activities, meeting with increased success.

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V.

THE HIGHLANDER RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM  
1957 - 1960

The American Consulate in Hue reported in March 1959 that the Viet Cong had launched a campaign of assassination and anti-government propaganda among the Highlanders. Reverend Gordon H. Smith, a missionary with the Highlanders since 1929, felt the situation was critical and reported that a wave of assassinations started in October or November 1958 in the mountain districts of Quang Ngai and Quang Nam provinces. The targets were Vietnamese and Highlander officials. The Viet Cong purpose was to paralyze the administration by murdering officials from the lowest information cadre to the district chief level. Some measure of the gravity of the situation was the admission by virtually all Quang Ngai provincial officials of Viet Cong activities in the mountains and that security was their major problem. An indication of the interest of Ngo Dinh Can, Diem's brother and de facto overlord of Central Vietnam, in the Highland situation was his transfer of the Office of Social Welfare for the Highlands from Dalat to Hue. The Consulate, taking into consideration the missionary reports, the elaborate security precautions taken by the government and the new impetus behind the government program for the Highlanders, concluded that the situation had deteriorated seriously since October 1958. The Viet Cong were considered to have obtained a "foothold" among the Highlanders, organizing in all the provinces from Pleiku northward and establishing secret bases at least in northern Kontum and southern Quang Nam (since then formed into Quang Tin Province).

In discussing the tribal situation, Reverend Smith expressed cautious optimism concerning the government plan to resettle the Highlanders. He believed the Highlanders must change their mode of life if they were to survive; adopting Vietnamese culture was probably, therefore, inevitable. But Reverend Smith also was critical of the government for not training more officials and army officers for duty in Highland areas and for its failure to understand even the simplest elements of Highlander psychology, a lack of comprehension which had frustrated many government efforts and often sent the Highlanders into the arms of the Viet Cong. As an example, Reverend Smith reported that Highlanders were usually frightened and cleared out when troops entered their villages. The Vietnamese as often as

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not took this as a sign of Communist sympathies and burned the villages.

The government program for the rapid cultural assimilation of the Highlander utilized both resettlement centers and schools. The Highlander resettlement centers, called "reservations" by the Vietnamese, would provide permanent land for the Highland villages where the Highlanders could be taught to practise Vietnamese agricultural techniques, as Diem had suggested in 1957. These centers were intended to bring the Highlanders out of the hills and into contact with Vietnamese culture. In February 1959, there were 33 "reservations" in existence for the entire Highlands covering some 13,000 hectares and having a population of some 38,000 Highlanders. Plans called for 47 additional "reservations" covering 17,000 hectares and containing a population of some 49,000 Highlanders, of which 20 centers were scheduled to be opened in 1959. The government's complete plan called for a total of 80 centers housing 88,000 Highlanders on 30,000 hectares of land. These plans covered approximately 12 percent of the Highlander population but as Nhu observed, many of the Highlanders left these "reservations"; and it would be some time before permanent populations would be established on them. The Hue Consulate observed that the Highlanders in these centers looked sullen and unhappy, which is not surprising when one considers that these Highlanders were being introduced to a new way of life alien to the one they had known and that the land allotted was inadequate. At the An My "reservation" in Pleiku each family received little more than a third of a hectare of land as was also the case at Son Ha in Quang Ngai. Vietnamese settlers in the Highlands were receiving a hectare per family.

In most cases the resettlement had been forced on the Highlanders by the government in the 1958-59 program. Their tribal life and customs were virtually destroyed and religious beliefs were in some instances ignored. Assistance promised the newly settled villagers failed to continue even in the cases where it did start, owing to an over-extension of the resettlement program in the face of insufficient funds. Several cases occurred where Rhade in the new villages were ordered to build their houses on the ground instead of on poles as was customary with them. In 1959 the government ordered the collection and destruction of Highlander crossbows because of its fear that the Highlanders would turn the crossbows against the government. This action limited hunting, especially in areas close to government installations. All of these problems plus a general lack of

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understanding from the Vietnamese caused most of the resettled Highlanders to filter back to the mountains. In two cases entire villages revolted and killed their Vietnamese guards so they could escape. These revolts do not appear to have been Viet Cong-inspired.

By 1960, the Highlander resettlement program had largely come to a halt. In Quang Ngai, the government had given up trying to establish resettlement areas "because there is not good land available for them." Though the resettlement areas at Ba To and Son Ha were still operating, the Director of Highlander Social Welfare, Ngo Van Hung, stated that the land was not really suitable for resettlement. In Quang Nam Province, officials admitted that the resettlement project at Thanh My was a complete failure and that no further effort was being made at the site. In Binh Dinh, eight Highlander resettlement centers had been established but none of them had been given good land, adequate schools, or technical assistance, essential ingredients of progress.

The Highlander schools established by the government were intended to carry Vietnamese ideas and techniques into the mountain villages. The school in Hue had its walls covered with posters showing the roles the students were expected to play upon their return to their villages: teacher, health instructor, Self-Defense Corps leader, agricultural instructor, etc. The government claimed that in 1959 every province in Central Vietnam had a Highlander school offering a short version of the program provided by the Hue school. All of these schools were under the direction of the Hue Office of Social Welfare for the Highlanders.

Yet in 1960 there was no school in Kontum for the 70,000 Highlanders in that province, and the 50 graduates of the Hue school working in Kontum had been absorbed by the Provincial Guard and Surete. In both Quang Ngai and Quang Nam, by early 1960 the program for training Highlander cadre had been dropped because of lack of funds. At the government's experimental farm near Banmethuot there were four Highlanders included among a total student body of 60. At the An Khe (Binh Dinh) weaving school for Highland girls, two-thirds of the student body totalling 25 were Highlanders. In Binh Dinh, there were three Highlander schools with a total of 91 students in the regular provincial school system.

False reporting by the Office of Social Welfare for the Highlands made the government program appear to be advancing more rapidly than it actually was. The Highlander resettlement

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center of Buon De, in Cheoreo, was announced to be open and operating in early 1959 when in fact it was still only a plan. The center at Nam Dong, in Thua Thien province, was reported operating in the winter of 1959 when all that could be found in the area in late 1959 was a Vietnamese settlement; nothing had been done for the Highlanders.

The Hue Consulate, after its examination of the government Highlander program, considered it well conceived but concluded that it had produced no important results. "With no training to prepare them (Vietnamese) for the frustrating task of administering a primitive and alien people, under pressure from their superiors, and obliged to place first priority on political control rather than on the social problems of the Montagnards, it is not surprising that the basic attitude of the average Vietnamese administrator is not far removed from that of Gia Long" who rejected the Highlanders even as subjects, saying that among such barbarians, it was impossible to find a notion of social duties. "The chief of Le Trung district (Pleiku) calls the Montagnards parasites; a Pleiku high school teacher says in front of her mixed class that Montagnards have less intelligence than the Vietnamese; the Chief of Province (Pleiku) complains that they are hopelessly improvident and drunkards to boot." Yet the Highlander leaders, looking at the extensive effort going into Vietnamese resettlement projects concluded that their progress must wait until the Vietnamese had taken up the best land. They continued to accuse the Vietnamese of requisitioning the Highlanders' land without compensation. Vietnamese officials invariably replied that the land was vacant and that in any event the land belonged to the government. Corruption also contributed to distrust. One Vietnamese official observed that government aid to the Highlanders, particularly the rice provided in times of scarcity, passed through so many hands that very little ever reached the Highlanders.

The government had failed by 1960 in its attempt to win the loyalty of the Highlanders through a shortage of resources, a more serious shortage of trained personnel and the low priority given the program. Though the government thought the Highlanders' autonomy movement was crushed, it was still alive if not very active. Highlander leaders were still thinking, however, in terms of some sort of autonomy. American residents in Pleiku believed the Highlanders would turn to open revolution if they could get arms. The Viet Cong were infiltrating the tribal villages establishing political cells, organizing guerrillas, propagandizing against the government's resettlement program, and obtaining a greater degree of control over the Highlanders than was even remotely suspected by the government.

VI.

THE VIET CONG OFFENSIVE AND GOVERNMENT REACTION  
1960 - 1961

In the fall of 1960, the Viet Cong launched a major offensive in the Highlands. Approximately 1,000 crack Viet Cong troops overran a string of Vietnamese army posts in a series of engagements between 21 October to 11 November. Their agents had penetrated the villages of the Highlanders and had threatened or enticed them into collaboration. The Viet Cong objective was apparently the establishment of an autonomous state for the Highlanders which the Viet Cong would control and thus provide an area from which they could launch further activities directed at the lowlands. The Viet Cong appeared to have achieved considerable success in their efforts to subvert the Rhade of Darlac, the Bahnar of Pleiku, and the Sedang of Kontum.

The government checked the fall 1960 Viet Cong offensive and by April 1961, President Diem expressed his satisfaction with the improvement of the situation in the Highlands and among the Highlanders. He laid the success of the government campaign to his decision to utilize artillery and air forces in the region. In Diem's opinion, the Highlanders, hearing and being subjected to such intense fire, quickly concluded the government was much too strong and ejected the Viet Cong agents from their midst, moving toward the greater force exhibited by the government. Diem reported that while many Highlanders had earlier objected to the government's policy of regroupment of the Highlanders into settled communities, many of them were now coming forward and requesting it because of the protection afforded against the Viet Cong. But what Diem failed to appreciate was that many Highlanders looked upon the bombing and shelling of their villages as attempts by the government to exterminate them and fled largely for this reason; thus these Highlanders were really refugees.

Diem announced that the government had started forming in late March 1961 five-man groups consisting of three Highlanders and two Vietnamese for small-scale operations into the mountain areas to locate and attack the Viet Cong or to report their location to the Army to permit counteraction. Diem said that three years earlier, he had recommended to the Americans the establishment of special Highlander units comparable to the Chasseurs Alpins of France and Italy, but the Americans had counselled against such a corps. Diem now believed the best method of using Highlanders was in smaller units. He disagreed with some of his generals who believed

that the Highlanders should be organized into special companies and larger units, commenting that the Highlanders would never be organized in this manner, as they would flee at the first sound of trouble when en masse and thus could only successfully be used in small groups infiltrating through the mountains. However, the government had created much of its own problem in mobilizing Highlanders for new military programs. Many of the Highlanders who were formerly in the Vietnamese Army had for various reasons been released from active duty and were leading the wave of anti-Vietnamese feeling which was sweeping through the villages of the Highlanders.

Diem also objected to sending any Highlanders to universities. He recalled that several years previously, when he had to remove them because they were lazy and dishonest. Diem remarked that the Highlanders were naturally lazy and that in the past, some of those who had had higher education at the Catholic seminaries, had upon return to their villages, reverted completely to their primitive ways.

Diem discounted reported successes of the Viet Cong to subvert the Rhade, stating that the Rhade were more intelligent and sophisticated than the other tribes and would not be influenced by the Viet Cong. Diem was basically correct. There were numerous indications that the Rhade as well as other tribesmen had no real desire to follow the Viet Cong even in cases where they felt they were being unfairly treated by the government. An example in August 1961 was Cu Piang village, where the Viet Cong made a great show of strength to trick government bombers into making an attack. The Viet Cong deserted the village prior to the attack but forced the villagers to remain. After the attack the Viet Cong returned to assist the villagers and advise them on the evil ways of the government. The Viet Cong offered the villagers a place in the jungle with them; however, all but two of the villagers fled the Viet Cong.

Minority factions in some tribes, opposed to tribal association with the government, did tend to be inclined towards the Viet Cong and later, the Viet Cong conducted a successful propaganda program that convinced many advocates of autonomy that the Viet Cong revolution would create such an autonomous state once the Viet Cong had crushed the government. But still the great majority did not favor the Viet Cong movement and desired to have no more to do with it than with the government. Nevertheless, if the Rhade were not influenced by the Viet Cong, they were certainly fearful of them. Only 20 Rhade voted in the 22 October 1961 special election in Darlac because of threats from the Viet Cong.

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If Diem in the spring of 1961 thought he had contained Viet Cong advances on the Highlands, he was certainly not as confident in September. The Viet Cong were indeed gaining control over greater numbers of Highlanders. In August 1961, the Viet Cong had established bases supported by the Highlanders and had begun organizing guerrilla units composed of Highlanders but led by Vietnamese who had infiltrated from North Vietnam. The security situation in Kontum and Pleiku provinces had become much worse. The Chief of Staff for II Corps at Pleiku stated in October 1961 that "we have lost the Highlanders". The majority of the 175,000 Highlanders in both provinces were under Viet Cong control. In Darlac province, Viet Cong activities had increased and they were rapidly gaining control of the Rhade villages. Informed observers as well as some Highlander leaders in the area believed that the only solution, distasteful as it seemed to them, was regrouping the Highlanders into larger communities which would be accessible to government security forces. The Highlanders argued that most of the Highlanders were forced to follow the Viet Cong because the government provided no security to the remote Highland villages.

In Quang Nam and Quang Tin provinces, the situation was no better, with the Viet Cong controlling most of the Highlanders in the western districts. By early 1962, the National Police in Tuyen Duc province believed the Viet Cong controlled all the Highlanders living in the mountains of that province and that there was little chance of the government establishing any effective control over these Highlanders in the near future. Though there are no reliable figures which can be used it is likely that the government exercised control or primary influence over no more than 50 percent of the estimated 700,000 Highlanders living in South Vietnam. In the northern provinces (Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh), where it is estimated 180,000 Highlanders lived, government control was limited to approximately 21,000.

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VII.

VIETNAMESE PACIFICATION PROPOSALS, 1961

Diem had ordered the Highlands Social Action Directorate to prepare a pacification plan for the Highlands. The plan, forwarded to Diem in September, reviewed the history of the Highlanders' grievances and Vietnamese programs, which provided Diem, if he had not been so informed before, with a very candid appraisal of the situation and the causes. The plan outlined specific causes for the autonomy movement in some detail:

1. "Resentment by a number of Highlander intellectuals because they were denied equivalent benefits and rights given to the Vietnamese for the equivalent position. After training they were not given equivalent jobs to their Vietnamese counterpart.
2. "In the Army, Highlander soldiers were discontented. Officers and non-commissioned officers were seldom promoted and often were not assigned to administrative units. Vietnamese soldiers did not salute Highlander officers. Highlander soldiers often were treated as coolies.
3. "Highlander members of the Self-Defense Corps were not treated equally with Vietnamese. Highlanders did not receive the same food at training centers as did the Vietnamese. Concerning salary, the National Fund provided only 300 piastres per month -- the remaining 600 piastres were to be supplied from the township budget. However, the township never had sufficient funds and sometimes salaries were not paid for two or three months.
4. "Government officials and men were not close to the people and therefore did not have a grasp of the situation. Some officials were irresponsible, exploited the Highlanders and organized speculation for personal profit. Other officials lacked the spirit, ability and endurance for the hardships and difficulties of the area.
5. "The administrative machine in the Highlands was too weak to control the situation.
6. "In some areas, working procedures were bogged down by bureaucratism and childishness. Only favorable reports were made and the bad things were not reported.



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7. "Inexperience, lack of knowledge of the situation, language, customs and traditions of the Highlanders by the Vietnamese created disappointment, suspicion and an apathetic attitude on the part of the Highlanders.

8. "Those in charge of Highlander resettlement centers treated the Highlanders badly. Crowded, harsh and unhealthy conditions contrasted vividly with the free atmosphere of the jungles and mountains. They were watched day and night and sometimes savagely beaten. Under such conditions the Highlanders' only wish was to run away to the deep jungles.

9. "To persuade and deny the Highlanders any alternative to joining the resettlement centers, some areas went so far as to destroy their villages, damaging their most valuable possessions such as dogs, pottery, etc. Confronted by these acts, the Highlanders became more frightened, suspicious and furious toward the government.

10. "Members of the Tsieng tribe were taken from the Delta area, resettled and integrated with the Die tribe in the Highlands. The Tsieng tribe was disappointed and irritated since they wanted to remain in the Delta area and didn't want to mingle with the Die, who have different customs and traditions.

11. "Highlander community workers were not permitted to work in accordance with tradition and customs. In some areas, Highlander youths who seldom desire to leave their villages, were forced to work in other areas for longer periods than agreed and were not permitted to return even when their food ran out. The workers were paid 30 piastres per day but had no understanding of the value of the money and thus were often cheated by dishonest traders; judging by the cost of the items purchased, the Highlanders resented the low pay scale.

12. "The Vietnamese often showed contempt for the Highlanders by abusing their customs and traditions.

13. "The Vietnamese occupied Highlander planting fields, killed their buffaloes, cut their bamboo, forbade them to hunt and fish, etc.

14. "Because the Central Highlands had been under French rule for a long time, the Highlanders still disliked the Vietnamese and have more confidence in the French.

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15. "The Highlanders are still backward and strongly prejudiced. Due to the lack of understanding of the government's policy of development in the Highlands plus a lack of unity and equality between the Vietnamese and Highlanders, the Highlanders are frightened by the idea that someday there would be no land left for them and that they would gradually be eliminated.

16. "Most seriously, the Viet Cong have exploited Highlander discontent, quietly urging them to oppose the government, by blowing up the differences and widening the gap between the Vietnamese and the Highlanders. The Viet Cong objectives, in this instance, are (1) to sabotage the resettlement program, (2) to push the Highlanders into opposition to the government, and (3) to demand an autonomous status for minorities."

The plan proposed that the Highlanders should be allowed to keep the land they were occupying and be assisted by the government in the economic, cultural, social and religious fields; recommended the overhaul of the basic administrative machinery as well as the forces for the protection of the Highlanders' villages; advised on methods of countering Viet Cong activities and getting the Highlanders to protect themselves against the Viet Cong; and suggested engineering the assassination of Viet Cong cadre and their Highlander agents.

In reviewing the Viet Cong program, the report emphasized the Viet Cong training of Highlanders who went north in 1954 and had since been infiltrated back to the south to lead the fight against the government. "The Viet Cong have organized men disguised as traders and members of the government security forces to oppress, to collect taxes and generally create hatred for the government among the Highlanders. Because of the backwardness and narrow-mindedness of the Highlander, they are easy prey for Viet Cong propaganda and distortion of fact. As a result, the movement for Highland autonomy has spread to all Highland groups. The Viet Cong have been quite successful in carrying out their new method of struggle; namely, to organize Highlanders to defend their villages, instigate them to attack government administrative posts, land-development centers, resettlement centers and to join the Viet Cong in their armed activities. More and more Highlander youths are leaving their villages to join the Viet Cong, thus creating a serious security situation in the Highlands. Through the tribes of Toi-Oi in Quang Tri, Rhe in Quang Ngai, Bahnar in the An Khe area, Sedang in Kontum, Jarai in Cheoreo, plus tribes in Darlac, Quang Duc, and Dong Nai Thuong, Viet Cong influence is gaining strength in the southernmost part of the Highlands."

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In December 1961, Captain Ngo Van Hung, Chief of the Highlands Social Action Directorate, presented to President Diem an annex covering subsidies necessary to support his pacification plan which he had presented in September. The annex called for 92.3 million piastres for food, books, and clothing to support 84,445 resettled Highlanders, 21,417 Highlander school children and medical supplies for 105,862 people. Captain Hung listed as the most important aspect of the government's plan to improve the standard of living of the Highlanders and thwart the efforts of the Viet Cong, the establishment of agricultural development centers. He reported 67 centers existed in December 1961; there were 84,445 Highlanders either at or planned for the agricultural development centers and resettlement centers. The Vietnamese were proposing revitalizing the Highlanders resettlement program that had stalled by 1960 for a number of reasons previously cited.

If the example of resettlement set by Quang Tri Province could have been transmitted to the other provinces, then resettlement of Highlanders might for a change have met with greater success. The American Consulate in Hue reported in September 1961 that 80 percent of the estimated 21,000 Highlanders in Quang Tri had been resettled in 44 villages. Where possible the Highlander resettlement villages were located around Vietnamese resettlement villages. There were instances where the Vietnamese settlers received 2,000 piastres for housing and the Highlanders received nothing, but the Highlanders were provided some fair land and a little other help. Most important in the Consulate's opinion was the fairly sympathetic approach taken by the Vietnamese officials and the relatively minimal amount of harassment of Highlanders by government military units. The Consulate believed that the program in Quang Tri had been more successful than in other provinces because of the interest of officials and reasonably fair treatment.

President Diem, by the fall of 1961, had decided upon a course of action involving the resettlement of Highland villages close to routes of communications which was undertaken by Brigadier General Ton That Dinh, II Corps Commander. U.S. military advisors in early May 1962 evaluated the program favorably but Diem, at this point, began to have second thoughts and decided that the government had neither sufficient rice nor money for the project, nor were the Highlanders worthy of the effort. Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother, persuaded Diem of the importance of continuing the program, which General Dinh believed was essential in gaining the support of the Highlanders.

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Diem also authorized the arming of Highlanders for defense of their villages beginning in the fall of 1961, though it appears that he did so with considerable reluctance and under pressure of events.

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